Preface: religious responses to technology.

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To what extent do science and technology affect societies that become exposed to them? Do they bring about new political patterns, social practices and concepts of personhood, or do they become re-interpreted within local traditions and invigorate existing forms of sociality? This special issue addresses these questions in the context of religious responses to new technologies. Our contributors discuss the challenge of science and technology from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and engage with different religious traditions. The papers presented here challenge conventional accounts about science and technology bringing about modernity, but also problematize those studies that have solely emphasized reproduction of traditional cultural concepts and practices.

Bob Simpson's paper explores the way genetics and new reproductive technologies are reinterpreted within the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. In particular, it examines the way Sri Lankan fertility doctors, members of ethics committees, Buddhist priests and interested lay people discuss embryogenesis. It is demonstrated that local engagement with new technologies is hardly ever a matter of passive acceptance. Instead it involves a complex exchange of ideas about technologies among the diverse Buddhist community and the emergence of rhetoric of endorsement amongst medics and scientists who re-interpret knowledges and practices stemming from genetics and biotechnology as compatible with the Buddhist tradition. According to Simpson, it is claimed that the relationship between personhood and the status of the embryo in Asian religious traditions is fundamentally different from that in the 'West'. Sri Lankan commentators situate the embryo in a moral space different from that reserved for it in Judeo-Christian culture, which allows them to make biotechnologies 'their own'. The paper thus troubles simplistic stories about religion reacting to the ethical challenges of science and considers

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how encounters with technological advances create the possibility for asserting new forms of identity.

A similar trajectory for religious engagement with biotechnology is presented in Yulia Egorova's account of Jewish responses to genetic tests aimed at reconstructing the history of different Jewish populations around the world. The paper focuses on a case study of an orthodox rabbi, who sees in genetic research a promise for the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple, and of an Indian Jewish community, who use genetics to assert their narrative of origin. Egorova suggests that in both cases the respondents both reject genetics as a means of 'testing' Jewishness and find ways in which they can use selectively the results of various DNA studies to assert preferred identities. It is demonstrated that in some situations technologies of population genetics make for a handy rhetorical tool for ascribing identities to oneself and others. What makes studies in population genetics such a good rhetorical source is the fact that though their results are perceived as impartial, when applied to complex historical questions about the origin of populations, they can hardly ever reach a consensus of opinion and are open for a variety of contradictory interpretations.

Santi Rozario has explored the way British Bangladeshi Muslim families who have children with genetic disorders call on Islam to interpret the nature of these conditions and to seek spiritual support in their plight. It is demonstrated that no matter whether the disease is seen as medical or spiritual, families often insist that the responsibility both for its emergence and for its cure is with Allah. Rozario argues that the reasons for her respondents' tendency to make Allah the ultimate decision-maker in their children's illness are multiple. Presenting genetic disorder as the will or the blessing of Allah is a way of coping with stigmatization which is likely to affect marriage opportunities for other children in the family or lead to one side of the family casting blame on the other. At the same time, it is suggested that for British Bangladeshis commitment to Islam and rejection of existing biomedical solutions to the problem of genetic disorders, such as prenatal screening, abortion and contraception, are also a way

of defining their identity after the event of 11 September 2001 and the following wars in Afghanistan and Iraq which put Muslim communities worldwide on the defensive.

The last two papers engage with contemporary Western Christian responses to technology. The paper by Sarah Davies, Matthew Kearnes and Phil Macnaghten looks at laypersons' reflections on the ethical implications of nanotechnology focusing on a group from a UK church. The authors challenge the accounts of public engagement with science that dismiss faith-based concerns about technological development as a naïve 'minority view'. Instead, they suggest that there is little difference in the way anxieties about new technologies are expressed by secular and religious participants. Moreover, the paper argues that religion provides a language to articulate the concerns and values shared by all respondents and a lot of the questions about the social and ethical implications of novel technologies are in a number of ways ontological and theological. The paper points out that current discussions of policies associated with nanotechnology often revolve around issues of risk and safety, which are important but contain no space for dealing with ontological issues emerging from public discourse about technology. The paper concludes that opening up the debate to such questions and letting the theological into science policy could form the basis for a deeper and more meaningful engagement between policy discourse and public opinion.

Finally, Elaine Graham's contribution reflects on how theological thinking might inform debates about human ontology in the context of recent advances in different kinds of technologies. The author explores what it might mean to develop a theology of technology and how Christian believers might view the relationship between technology, nature and actions of God. Graham posits that technology has for a long time had the capacity to challenge human imagination and to take on meanings beyond their immediate material significance. It is suggested that theological reflections on the relationship between nature, divinity, humanity and transcendence may develop new understandings of what it means to be human in the context of recent technological advances.

The material presented here appears to tell a number of stories about the relationship between technology and religion. In some cases this engagement provides an example of cultural appropriation of science and technology (see Hard and Jamison 2005), when technological advances are made to fit already existing religious traditions and are even employed to assert preferred markers of self-identification and external categorisation. In other cases religion seems to provide a means for responding to and making sense of new technologies for a wide range of 'lay' users, from religious specialists to those who consider themselves secular. Sometimes, science and technology stand as a proxy for Western cultural traditions which supposedly belong to an epistemology and system of values critically different from those of local beliefs. Sometimes, they are perceived as a context independent piece of superior knowledge and are construed as more compatible with the local tradition than with the beliefs of the 'others'. In other situations, they are seen as alien to indigenous beliefs, and yet selectively called upon if need arises. What unites the responses considered here is the way they demonstrate that the engagement between religion and technology is hardly ever a matter of the latter having a modernising effect on the former, or the former rejecting the latter offhand. We hope the issue will be of interest both to specialists in the study of religions and in the social studies of science and are grateful to Paul Tremlett and Malory Nye for the opportunity to present this work.

References:

Hard, M. and Jamison, A. (2005) *Hubris and Hybrids: a cultural history of technology and science*, New York and London: Routlegde.